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On Renzo Novatore

Enzo Martucci

My soul is a sacrilegious temple
in which the bells of sin and crime
voluptuous and perverse,
loudly ring out revolt and despair.

These words written in 1920, give us a glimpse of the promethean being of Renzo Novatore.

Novatore was a poet of the free life. Intolerant of every chain and limitation, he wanted to follow every impulse that rose within him. He wanted to understand everything and experience all sensations – those which lead to the abyss and those which lead to the stars. And then at death to melt into nothingness, having lived intensely and heroically so as to reach his full power as a complete man.

The son of a poor farmer from Arcola, Italy, Abile Riziero Ferrari (Renzo Novatore) soon showed his great sensibility and rebelliousness. When his father wanted him to plow the fields he would flee, stealing fruit and chickens to sell so that he could buy books to read under a tree in the forest. In this way he educated himself and quickly developed a taste for non-conformist writers. In these he found reasons for his instinctive aversion

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to oppression and restriction, to the principles and institutions that reduce men to obedience and renunciation.

As a young man he joined the Arcola group of anarcho-communists, but he was not satisfied with the harmony and limited freedom of the new society they awaited so eagerly. "I am with you in destroying the tyranny of existing society," he said, "but when you have done this and begun to build anew, then I will oppose and go beyond you."

Until he was fifteen years old, Renzo included the church in his poetry. After that, freed and unprejudiced, he never planted any roots in the gregarious existence of his village, but often found himself in conflict with both men and the law. He scandalized his respectable family, who wondered what they had done to deserve such a devil...

...Novatore, who was influenced by Baudelaire and Nietzsche, asserted that we had needs and aspirations that could not be satisfied without injury to the needs and aspirations of others. Therefore we must either renounce them and become slaves, or satisfy them and come into conflict with Society, whatever kind it may be, even if it calls itself anarchist. Novatore:

Anarchy is not a social form, but a method of individuation. No society will concede to me more than a limited freedom and a well-being that it grants to each of its members. But I am not content with this and want more. I want all that I have the power to conquer. Every society seeks to confine me to the august limits of the permitted and the prohibited. But I do not acknowledge these limits, for nothing is forbidden and all is permitted to those who have the force and the valor.

Consequently, anarchy, which is the natural liberty of the individual freed from the odious yoke of spiritual and material

rulers, is not the construction of a new and suffocating society. It is a decisive fight against all societies — christian, democratic, socialist, communist, etc., etc. Anarchism is the eternal struggle of a small minority of aristocratic outsiders against all societies which follow one another on the stage of history.

Those were the ideas expressed by Novatore in *Il Libertario* of La Spezia, *L'Iconoclasta* of Pistoia, and other anarchist journals. And these were the ideas that then influenced me as I was well-prepared to receive them.

During World War I Novatore refused to fight for a cause that was not his own and took to the mountains. Astute, courageous, vigilant, his pistol at the ready the authorities failed at every attempt to capture him. At the end of the war the deserters were amnestied and he was able to return to his village where his wife and son were waiting for him.

I was sixteen years old and had run away from home and my studies, freeing myself from my bourgeois family, who had done everything they could to stop my anarchist activities. Passing through Saranza on my way to Milan, I stopped to get to know Novatore, having read his article “My Iconoclastic Individualism”. Renzo came at once to meet me together with another anarchist called Lucherini.

We passed unforgettable hours together. Our discussions were long and he helped me fill gaps in my thinking, setting me on my way to the solution of many fundamental problems. I was struck by his enthusiasm.

His appearance was impressive. Of medium height he was athletic in build, and had a large forehead. His eyes were vivacious and expressed sensibility, intelligence and force. He had an ironic smile that revealed the contempt of a superior spirit for men and the world. He was thirty-one years old, but already had the aura of genius.

After two months wandering around Italy with the police at my heels, I returned to Arcola to see Renzo again. But Emma,

his wife, told me that he was also hunted and that I could only meet him at night in the forest.

Once again we had long discussions and I was able to appreciate his exceptional qualities as a poet, philosopher and man of action even more. I valued the power of his intellect and his fine sensitivity which was like that of a Greek god or a divine beast. We parted for the last time at dawn.

Both of us were existing under terrible conditions. We were in open struggle against Society, which would have liked to throw us in jail. Renzo had been attacked in his house at Fresonaro by a band of armed fascists who intended to kill him, but he had driven them off with home-made grenades. After that he had to keep a safe distance from the village.

Despite being an outlaw, he continued to develop his individualist anarchist ideas in libertarian papers. I did the same and we aroused the anger of the theoreticians of anarcho-communism. One of them, Professor Camillo Berneri, described us in the October, 1920 issue of *L'Iconoclasta* as "Paranoid megalomaniacs, exalters of a mad philosophy and decadent literature, feeble imitators of the artists of opium and hashish, sirens at so much an hour."

I could not reply because in the meantime I had been arrested and shut up in a House of Correction. But Renzo replied for both of us and took "this bookworm in whom it is difficult to find the spirit and fire of a true anarchist" to task.

More than a year later I was provisionally released from prison, but I could find out nothing regarding the whereabouts of Renzo. Finally I received the terrible news that he had been killed.

He was at an inn in Bolzaneto, near Genova, along with the intrepid illegalist S.P., when a group of *carabinieri* arrived disguised as hunters. Novatore and S.P. immediately opened fire and the police responded. The tragic result was two dead, Renzo and Marasciallo Lempano of the *carabinieri*, and one po-

liceman wounded. This was in 1922: a few months before the fascist march on Rome.

So a great and original poet, who, putting his thoughts and feelings into action, attacked the mangy herd of sheep and shepherds, died at the age of thirty three. He showed that life can be lived in *intensity*, not in *duration* as the cowardly mass want and practice.

After his death it was discovered that, together with a few others, he was preparing to strike at society and tear from it that which it denies the individual. And in the Assizes Court where his accomplices were tried, a prosecuting counsel acknowledged his bravery and called him "a strange blend of light and darkness, love and anarchy, the sublime and the criminal."

A few friends collected some of his writings and posthumously published them in two volumes: *Above Authority (Al Disopra dell'Arco)* and *Toward the Creative Nothing (Verso il Nulla Creatore)*. Other writings remained with his family or were lost.

So an exceptional man lived and died — the man I felt was closest to me in his ideals and aspirations. He described himself as "an atheist of solitude" He wanted to "ravish the impossible" and embraced life like an ardent lover. He was a lofty conquistador of immortality and power, who wanted to bring all to the maximum splendor of beauty.